MERRILL MEMORIES - HOMECOMING 2015

COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND’S PHILIP MERRILL COLLEGE OF JOURNALISM
AND THE SHIRLEY POVICH CENTER FOR SPORTS JOURNALISM

Bob Ford ’76
Sports Columnist, Philadelphia Inquirer

When I first walked into a journalism classroom at the University of Maryland, I had four failed attempts at locating a major field of study on my transcript, a decent side job driving a delivery truck for the Coca-Cola bottling plant on New Hampshire Ave., and a growing suspicion I’d be getting my permanent Class B license sooner than later.

Looking back now, across a 40-year career in newspapers that has given me the opportunity to travel the world to report stories, to witness some of the most memorable sporting events of a generation, I recall how close I was to a career stacking cases of Fanta Orange at a Northeast deli.

What I found inside that first journalism classroom wasn’t a moment of revelation, or an immediate sense that I had finally opened the right door. I found people who were willing to give me a chance and see what would happen. I found an environment that was both professional and demanding, but still nurturing. I found a dedication to the craft that was infectious.

Today, when you visit Knight Hall, the facilities are overwhelmingly impressive and the technology first-rate. The ability for students to be on the very cutting edge of news-gathering research and to have all the equipment necessary to learn how to assemble and disseminate that information over all the modern platforms is as good as any school in the country.

What strikes me most, however, when I visit the Shirley Povich Center for Sports Journalism. Prior to George Solomon joining the faculty and creating the sports journalism program in 2003, I looked for every opportunity to cut my teeth and prepare myself for a career in the sports industry. I called games for WMUC, produced packages for UMTV and was added to the schedule my junior year, I finally had that opportunity.

And it was that class, and listening to many of the guest speakers brought in to talk to us, that helped me realize there were opportunities in sports beyond being an athlete or a journalist. The lessons and experience gained from Solomon’s class led me to an internship with the Washington Redskins in the PR department, where part of my job was to provide the beat reporters information and statistics to help them craft their stories.

The Redskins job led to a post-graduation position with a major PR firm, which put me on a fantastic career path. And while my role today as NASCAR’s senior director of integrated marketing doesn’t call upon specific lessons learned in journalism class (like AP Style), I never would have gotten here without my time at Merrill, or my time at WMUC and UMTV.

I had some incredible experiences, especially as part of the crew at WMUC. One of my favorite memories (but only now, many years later) was a trip to Tallahassee to call a women’s basketball game against FSU. A huge storm was bearing down on College Park and newscasters were saying all flights would be grounded. So, as a slightly irresponsible college sophomore, I went to the airport to fly to Florida sans suitcase with only the clothes on my back, assuming we’d never actually leave College Park. Of course, not only were we able to fly out, but we got stranded in Florida after the blizzard hit Maryland, and I was forced to spend a few in a hotel room wearing the same outfit I had flown out with. I can’t recall if the Terps won the game, but since that day I’ve always made sure to be prepared for anything.

I’m a proud University of Maryland alum.

David Selig ’06
Sports Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel

I broke that rule and I’m glad I did.

For me, it wasn’t about rooting for a specific school. Coming from the Boston suburbs, I didn’t grow up a fan of the Terps. But I knew that to launch a successful career in sports journalism, I needed to be close to the action.

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When asked to write this piece about my greatest memories from my time at the University of Maryland, there weren’t too many classroom scenes that popped into mind. That’s not to say anything negative about my professors. The best part about my experience at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism was that they taught us the basics and then pushed us to go out and do it.

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Running up the scores.

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That meant pulling an all-nighter in The Diamondback newsroom putting together the preview section for the ACC men’s basketball tournament—then driving to Greensboro, N.C., a few hours later to cover it.

It meant sitting in the offices of Gary Williams and Ralph Friedgen and doing my best not to ask a dumb question that would make me look like an unprepared amateur.

I’ll never forget writing the game story when Williams became the winningest coach in school history. I was there at the NFL draft chronicling Vernon Davis’ teary first minutes as a professional. And I was lucky enough to spend a summer intership covering the Baltimore Orioles and Washington Nationals.

Beyond those pinch-me moments, I relished each time I walked into a classroom and saw my peers reading my stories in the student paper. (OK, maybe they were just doing the crossword puzzle on the adjacent page, but play along.)

All that hands-on training as an undergraduate had me more than ready for my first job, and the classroom lessons actually came quite handy when my career veered down an editing path.

This spring, I was hired to be the Sports Editor at the largest newspaper in South Florida. That wasn’t even on the list of goals for the kid who first stepped foot in College Park and thought it might be a cool place to study journalism.

The irony is that, as much as I love sports, I never became a die-hard, paint-your-face type of Terps fan like some of my friends. As someone who was often watching from the press seats, I was more concerned with coming up with something catchy to write and making deadline than stressing out about whether Maryland won. (Maybe except for those games against Duke.)

That said, I’m glad I chose this school. I’m proud to be a Terp. And if my college memories include locker rooms and news conferences and a few times that I blew off class to go on the road and cover a game, then ultimately I got exactly what I wanted out of my college experience.

There is no greater learning experience than those that come firsthand, and it was those experiences that prepared me for my first job.

Furthermore, I landed my first job because of an online portfolio I created in one of my classes.

Ever since I was a kid I knew I wanted to be a writer. But the Philip Merrill College of Journalism turned my interest into a passion. I thought I would only be interested in sports coverage, but at the J-school I fell in love with journalism and with the news, and not many people can say the work they do every day is their passion. So for that, I am very lucky.

I also met my husband in J-school, and he later proposed on a bench outside Knight Hall where we first met. We were married on Sept. 26.

So when I say I would not be where I am today without Philip Merrill and the University of Maryland, I mean it. Graduating from UMD is my proudest accomplishment, and the experiences I gained there have shaped me immeasurably.

Travis Mewhirter
‘12
Sportswriter, Orange County Register; Today’s U

I make, by no insignificant margin, considerably less money than my non-journalism friends. I don’t drive a BMW or Mercedes, same as I am not a member at a ritzy golf club. My weekends are not spent at the local bars or napping, rather scrambling to get my story and statistics in 15 minutes after some school defeated another school. Same goes for most holidays and special occasions.

And I can tell you one thing with absolute, unequivocal certainty: Every one of my friends is jealous.

They are jealous that I get to wake up, legitimately thrilled to go to work. They are jealous that I come home close to midnight more often than not, and I won’t shut up about the game I just covered, or the story I wrote, or the kind email that I received from a parent who just ordered 30 extra copies of the centerpiece on her kid

None of this would be possible without the University of Maryland. There is a reason it is annually ranked in the top five journalism schools in the country. Trust me. It’s easy for me to see this in 20-20 hindsight, when I am not receiving zeroes for missing one letter in one seemingly insignificant name mentioned in one unmemorable paragraph, or being sent out to PG Plaza to do 30 man-on-the-street interviews with reluctant passersby who just want to shop at the mall and not be bugged by some 20-something with a pen and notepad.

Without Maryland, I would not be where I am today—in Orange County, Calif.—and that is the indisputable truth. When I enrolled in the Philip Merrill College of Journalism, I thought I was a strong writer. I was also wrong.

Every paper I got back looked like it was subjected to some terrible massacre, there was so much red ink on it. It was trying and challenging and everything a young, raw journalist needed. So you learn, you adjust. You make that extra call. You give the story one more edit. You do this because, you soon discover, you love it. You find yourself coming home on a Friday night and you’d rather read Sports Illustrated than go out. And that passion, fostered by Maryland, doesn’t wane, it simply manifests into a lifestyle that you become completely enamored with.

Aaron Carter, M.A.
‘12
Sportswriter, Philadelphia Inquirer

The Merrill College of Journalism didn’t just prepare me for a career in the field. Rather the people inside it gave me the strength to persevere once I faced the industry’s harsh realities.

Two weeks into my first job, I very nearly quit the business.

I was in a strange place that was far from home; my ambition and creativity were squelched by the pressures of a thinned-out newsroom short on cooperation and long on dysfunction.

Disillusioned, disenfranchised and distraught, I reached out to my former Merrill College professors for weekly pep talks.

On one such occasion, George Solomon, Director of the Shirley Povich Center for Sports Journalism, uttered words that changed my life.

“Aaron,” Solomon said, “don’t quit. Promise me you won’t quit.”

I made and kept that promise. Nearly 10 months later, I earned a job covering high school sports in my hometown at the Philadelphia Daily News.

About a year after that, I was named Sports Reporter of the Year by the Pen and Pencil Club, purportedly the oldest continuously operating press club in the country. A year after that, I was hired by the Philadelphia Inquirer, where I cover high schools and other assorted sports.

You can see, brick and mortar buttress the building, but the Merrill College is built on the talented, devoted and compassionate people inside its walls.

Even after I graduated, some of the best minds in academia and journalism such as Kevin Blackistone and Rafael Lorente, still lent their ears. Alan Gouldenbach, another former professor, had moved on to teach at Utica College in New York, but still answered the phone and provided guidance from afar.

As recently as October, Stan Heist, another former professor who has since moved on with his broadcast career, still took time to critique the first video story I ever filmed, produced and edited for the Inquirer.

And my former classmates, who are doing amazing things across the country such as Ana Sebesen, with whom I graduated, is now a producer for HBO’s VICE series. She also generously lent her expertise when I sent her my video.

I draw inspiration from Merrill graduates such as Andy Marso, who wrote the book “Worth the Pain,”
which reveals how meningitis nearly killed him but also changed his life. He is currently based in Kansas and now champions meningitis awareness across the country.

I also find daily motivation in the progress of Whitney Harris with whom I graduated, who is quickly becoming a force as a television reporter at WTOC in Savannah, Ga.

That’s what the Merrill College has done for me. It’s about the relationships you make and the willingness of everyone to help each other excel.

And hopefully, new batches of tenacious Terps will continue to flood the industry, powered by the tenets of journalism espoused by the professors in the building and assisted by those of us already in the field.

Savannah, Ga.

Whitney Harris with whom I graduated, who is quickly

My freshman year, I freelanced for the College Park Patch, which taught me about interviewing people on the street and the basics putting together a story. Those skills were reinforced in introductory journalism classes, where AP style, lead writing and interview techniques were all covered in depth. I was also introduced to the “Merrill F,” which was an automatic F for any misspelling of a proper name. I never made that mistake again.

Choosing the multimedia track introduced me to the different platforms for journalists today. I learned to film and edit basic news videos in class, and put that skill to the test as a multimedia reporter at the Diamondback. I also learned the basics of design, copy editing, magazine writing, sportswriting and coding through my more advanced classes. Moreover, with the program requiring internships, I managed to do a copy editing internship at McClatchy-Tribune the summer going into my junior year, and an editorial internship at National Geographic Magazine spring semester of my senior year.

But some of the most memorable experiences came from my sportswriting class, the Journalism Center for Children and Families, and Capital News Service. In my sports class, the readings were fascinating, assignments fun and discussions eye-opening. Some of my favorite assignments were covering a local high school football game and a Maryland football game. That class opened the door to my monthly column on the Shirley Povich Center for Sports Journalism website, called “In Class,” in which I wrote about journalism student experiences during their senior year.

Before graduating in the spring of 2014, I utilized all my mentors at the college, career fairs and email blasts towards my job hunt. I ended up landing the Atlantic Media editorial fellowship, where I was placed at Quartz, the company’s global business site. As the fellowship neared an end, I made my way back to D.C. to accept a position as News Editor and Fitness Editor at The Washington Post Express, where I am now.

Jimmy Reed ’13
Pitcher, St. Louis Cardinals Organization

I’ll never forget the day I moved into Kent Hall at the University of Maryland. It was a warm, late afternoon in August 2010. As all freshmen normally do, I packed way too much. I was already sweating bullets from the summer humidity, but the multiple trips up and down our three flights of stairs (we would later refer to our dorm as the penthouse) was only making matters worse.

My roommate had already arrived and was unpacking when I got there. Envision the quintessential college roommate first interaction: walking into the dorm room, your roommate being there already, exchanging pleasantries. It felt like a movie scene.

We went out to lunch with our parents after unpacking, we said our goodbyes, and our moms shed some tears. That was it. We were on our own.

My time as a college student is just a small chapter in my life, but the experiences, memories, and relationships will last me a lifetime.

Many of those relationships I created were within the rooms and labs of Knight Hall, home of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism. The friendships I forged there allowed me to reach my full potential not only as a student getting ready to enter the workforce, but also as a person.

It was here that I learned to be punctual in everything I do.

Merrill gave me an education that not many other students at Maryland could get. Instead of studying out of a textbook and reading hundreds of pages a night, I was out talking to people. I wasn’t writing an academic thesis paper on Shakespeare; I was writing about what real people thought about real issues.

I learned how to be pushed. Our professors and teachers always wanted more. There’s always something more to the story that you haven’t found yet, they would tell us. They pushed us to find it. And we pushed ourselves as classmates to find it, too.

Now, when I go back to College Park and see students walking around campus, I can’t help but be jealous. They have freedom and a tight knit community of likeminded individuals. But maybe I’m better off now. I’m also in a tight knit community, one that I couldn’t be more proud to be in: a huge pool of Terrapin alumni. Once a Terp, always a Terp.

Zainab Mudallal ’14
News and Fitness Editor at The Washington Post Express

My four years at University of Maryland were some of the most enriching years of my life.

Coming from the United Arab Emirates, I was welcomed by friends, professors and the community at the university and Philip Merrill College of Journalism.

Throughout the four years, I tried to immerse myself in as many experiences as I could. In addition to assignments at journalism classes and outside requirements, being involved on campus and in the community taught valuable experiences.

My freshman year, I freelanced for the College Park Patch, which taught me about interviewing people on the street and the basics putting together a story. Those skills were reinforced in introductory journalism classes, where AP style, lead writing and interview techniques were all covered in depth. I was also introduced to the “Merrill F,” which was an automatic F for any misspelling of a proper name. I never made that mistake again.

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Rhiannon Walker ’15
Sportswriter, Dallas Morning News

The University of Maryland, College Park was always my No. 1 school when I was looking at colleges, and it was my dream school.

When I say Maryland was a second home to me, I’m not kidding. When I was in elementary school, I was constantly on the campus for Black Saga competitions in Stamp, and my parents brought me to a number of women’s and men’s basketball games.

When I realized that I wanted to pursue journalism -- after realizing I’d have to study physics and calculus if I wanted to be an architect -- I made a concerted effort to be at all Merrill College's open houses.

That’s where I meet Olive Reid, and for two years, I talked to her about my interests and what is required of me to get into the school. I was accepted into the University, but I was not accepted into Philip Merrill College of Journalism, and I was upset, but I didn’t cry about it.

I reached out to Olive constantly -- telling her about my grades in English and my AP scores, and I promised her, that if the administration found a spot for me, she would not regret it.

Before I ever entered the journalism school, I learned about hard work and how to make connections. I learned that being good on paper wasn’t always good enough, and that sometimes you do need other people behind the scenes to advocate for you.

I was in the late Penny Fuchs’ class my entire freshman year, and in her honors class my spring semester. Her class whipped me into shape, and I learned quickly how to write a clean story with all the facts and a little sizzle.

Penny never got to see the person or journalist I became, and that tears me to shreds, but she really cared about me.

I learned how hard it is to be a good journalist, let alone trying to be a great one. I learned how to handle tragedy very early on and setbacks. I learned how to handle success as well -- I treated the internships and opportunities I got the same way I treated basketball in high school, if I do my job other people will see it and they will recognize my potential.

One of the things that stood out in my conversation with Scott Van Pelt at a Povich Center panel was when he told me how important it is for him to reach back. He told me after the panel, he was going to get a job, and he told me how he'd treat the youth and see them reach back. He told me after the panel, he was going to get a job, and he told me how he'd treat the youth and see them reach back. He told me after the panel, he was going to get a job, and he told me how he'd treat the youth and see them reach back. He told me after the panel, he was going to get a job, and he told me how he'd treat the youth and see them reach back. He told me after the panel, he was going to get a job, and he told me how he'd treat the youth and see them reach back. He told me after the panel, he was going to get a job, and he told me how he'd treat the youth and see them reach back.